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BODY:

Real estate agents still promote the "rural flavor" of Charles County, noting the horse farms that dot the Southern Maryland landscape. But the Nov. 4 election results -- with an overwhelming victory for Barack Obama in the county -- confirm what developers and demographers have been saying:

Charles is becoming a core Washington suburb, politically and economically aligned more with neighboring Prince George's than with the other two Southern Maryland counties, where voters went solidly for Republican John McCain.

The majority of Charles residents now commute into the Capital Beltway for work, and the county's commercial development has far outstripped its more rural neighbors. Although the population also has grown significantly in Calvert and St. Mary's counties, they are not generally considered bedroom communities for Washington, and are significantly more homogeneous.

McCain won 53 percent of the vote in Calvert and 56 percent in St. Mary's, while Obama took 63 percent in Charles.

Some experts believe that the changes in Charles eventually could distance the political leadership from Southern

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Maryland neighbors. The three counties have long worked as one on many issues through the Tri-County Council and a unified delegation in Annapolis, but Charles leaders have begun to focus more on transportation and economic development issues -- including a proposed light rail system between Waldorf and the Branch Avenue Metro station -- that would not directly affect the other two.

"It might make more sense [for Charles] to start working more with the suburban counties than with the counties without their strong retail sector or diverse population," said political scientist Ronald Walters, director of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland. "It does look more like a junior Prince George's."

Charles's transformation from rural to suburban began in the 1970s and '80s, but its political coming of age has been more recent. Just four years ago, the county's presidential vote was split 50 to 49 for Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.). Since 2004, the county's booming population has lost 10 percent of its Republicans and gained 64 percent more Democrats as its population expanded to about 150,000. Obama's margin in Charles was even larger than in the state as a whole.

"It's a much more dramatic shift than you usually see," said demographer Robert E. Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech.

The ingredients for change include the replacement of the county's signature tobacco farms with subdivisions and strip malls, combined with a dramatic demographic shift resulting from a steady flow of upwardly mobile black families moving from Prince George's, the nation's most affluent majority-black community. The number of African American residents in Charles has more than doubled since 1990 as families migrate south in search of larger homes, better schools and a lower crime rate. The county is now home to the nation's fastest-growing black population outside of the Atlanta suburbs.

Charles's newest residents bring with them a commitment to the Democratic Party forged in politically active Prince George's, leaders say. The new influence was on full display in 2006, when every local Republican leader -- down to the sheriff and the judge of the orphans' court -- was voted out of office, and the county elected its first two black commissioners.

"It was a turning point in terms of who turned out to vote and what they said was important to them, which were not necessarily the same things that had always been important to people," said Commissioner Reuben B. Collins II, an African American lawyer who was elected in 2006 and serves the northernmost part of the county, where much of the population growth has been concentrated.

The breakneck pace of change in Charles has fueled the debate about the county's identity and whether it should align itself politically with Prince George's or with Calvert and St. Mary's.

Local elected officials said they plan to continue working with other Southern Maryland legislators in Annapolis and Washington so that the counties' political clout can be combined. Charles officials occasionally gripe that the county does not receive attention commensurate with its growing size and Democratic population -- the lack of a Southern Maryland resident in Gov. Martin O'Malley's Cabinet is a particular sore spot -- but the region's representation in political leadership is considerable. U.S. House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer lives in St. Mary's, State Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. lives in Calvert and State Sen. Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton, who is often mentioned as a possible replacement for Miller, lives in Charles. Hoyer and Miller also represent parts of Prince George's.

Middleton said he sees significant benefits in political cooperation among the three Southern Maryland counties despite their differences, but he added that Charles is only beginning to develop its own political identity.

"When I talk to African Americans who have recently moved into Charles County and want to be part of its leadership, they have a vision of a different Charles County," said Middleton, a lifelong county resident and fourth-term

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senator. "Newer residents are starting to get involved, and they're changing things."

Research director Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

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